

The
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Education in Chile

The fraught politics of the classroom

Deadlock over who should pay for education, and who should profit from it

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IT WAS back in May, in the southern-hemisphere autumn, when Chile's students and many schoolchildren began taking to the streets to demand wholesale reform of the education system. Now spring has come, but there is no sign of settling what has turned into the most serious political conflict for two decades in Latin America's most successful country. Talks between the students and the government began in August, but broke down on October 5th. Chile is paying an increasingly high price for the deadlock.



Pupils have occupied hundreds of schools since May, locking out their teachers and depriving tens of thousands of children of their education. Many university students have not been to classes for months. Most weeks they stage marches, often unauthorised, in Santiago, the capital. With depressing predictability these end in clashes between a minority of violent youths and the police. Many residents now avoid the city centre on protest days to escape the bricks, bottles, water cannon and tear gas. Some 1,800 protesters have been arrested since May and over 500 police injured. The damage runs into millions of dollars. Having seen his popularity plummet since the dispute began, Chile's beleaguered centre-right president, Sebastián Piñera, is trying to deflect the education debate into one about law and order.

Doing so may help him a bit, but not much. The students' underlying cause remains popular. Education is expensive, and parents pick up most of the bill. Nearly 40% of spending on schools and higher education is made by households—by far the highest figure in the OECD, a group of mainly rich countries. Almost half of pupils attend what are known as “subsidised” schools, where costs are split between the state and parents, who pay on average \$400 per

child a year (in a country where the monthly minimum wage is \$363). Only 15% of spending on higher education comes from public sources, compared to an OECD average of 69%. The rest comes from households.

What makes this harder to stomach is that many educational establishments are profit-making businesses. That is true of a third of secondary schools and of the technical and vocational colleges attended by two-thirds of students in higher education. Three-quarters of universities are private: in 1981 they were barred from making profits, but many have got around this restriction by setting themselves up as property companies that lease their premises to the universities.

The students argue, correctly, that education is a public good. Less justifiably, they want the whole system to be “free” (ie, paid for by the taxpayer) and run by the state. They want these two demands put to a plebiscite. The government says universal state funding would be a subsidy to the rich. Mr Piñera, himself a businessman, has no qualms about schools making a profit. At least two of his ministers have past links to educational businesses (as do prominent opposition politicians).

In August the students set out more specific demands in a letter to Mr Piñera. Among other things, they want the government, rather than local councils and parents, to finance the “subsidised” schools; a fairer share-out of state money among universities; and for the state, rather than private banks, to offer student loans. The government has sent a bill to Congress to cut the interest rate on student loans from 6% to 2%, and says that the poorest 40% of students will receive grants. It will also gradually transfer municipal “subsidised” schools to the education ministry, but not make them free. It has proposed a 7.2% rise in education spending in next year's budget. In what has become a polarised argument, other vital issues such as the quality of teaching or evaluations of school performance have hardly been broached.

Many of the government's proposals are sensible, but they do not go far enough to placate the students. Mr Piñera now seems to hope that the protests will run out of steam. As summer approaches, they may. Public support has begun to erode as Chileans become fed up with seeing their cities vandalised.

But that is unlikely to be the end of the matter. Polls show that education has become Chileans' top concern. Over the past 20 years the number of students in higher education has quadrupled; many of them are the first in their families to get there. And if Chile is to achieve Mr Piñera's aim of becoming a developed country, it needs a better-educated workforce. The

government is surely right to resist a wholly taxpayer-funded, state-run system. But it should also note that the world's top universities are non-profit bodies, and that Chile is distressingly far from providing equal opportunities for its people.

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